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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000708

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON PHUM MR

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: AZIZ' 1ST QUARTER REPORT CARD -- A LOW B AVERAGE WITH SOME STRONG SUBJECTS

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for reasons 1.4 (B and D)

¶1. (C) Summary -- Three months into the democratically elected Aziz government, the new President has begun to change opinions of some of his critics with very strong performance in addressing corruption and terrorism and a good effort in addressing humanitarian/social emergencies. Foreign policy has been active with good results from a Mauritanian perspective (albeit with some questionable initiatives from an American point of view). Bilateral relations are progressing steadily though with a certain degree of hesitance drawn from the combative relationship of the past year. The government has yet to define coherent economic development and social policies. While there have been no significant advances in political and press freedoms nor in human rights, neither has the new government done anything particularly bad in those areas. Overall performance is likely to improve as the government works through its settling-in period. End Summary

¶2. (C) "The Asterisk Democracy" -- The Mauritanian Presidential Elections of July 18 ended the political crisis of the previous year by allowing for a constitutional transfer of power following the August 6, 2008, coup d'etat. With his inauguration August 5, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz brought Mauritania back into the family of democracies; however, since Aziz had launched the 2008 coup and had benefited from his control of power through the campaign, the new democracy was subject to skepticism. While the international community accepted the election results, actual performance in governing democratically will determine at long-term evaluation of the Aziz government. Following is Post's purely subjective evaluation of the Aziz government after three months in the key areas of:

Security Affairs	B	3.0
Good Governance	B	3.3
Political and Press Freedom	C-	1.7
Human Rights	C	2.3
Economic Management	B-	2.7
Foreign Affairs	B	3.0
Public Opinion.	B	3.0
GPA	B-	2.7

¶3. (C) Security - B :

Positives: Drawing from his extensive experience in charge

of Mauritanian security affairs, President Aziz has not given up his Security Czar role and is clearly the decision maker. The Mauritanians have continued to be very effective in breaking up tentative Al Qaeda plans and detaining AQIM elements. While AQIM launched an unsuccessful suicide bombing attack against the French Embassy on August 8, the Mauritanians effectively thwarted other threats planned for Aziz' first month in power (which coincided with the month of Ramadan). The Mauritanians, despite their continued suspicions of Malian commitment to the counter-terrorism fight, actively engaged in the Algerian-led efforts to coordinate anti-AQIM activities between Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. The Mauritanians have actively sought to expand security cooperation with France. They are also re-engaging on military cooperation with the U.S. although with a certain hesitance drawn both from the U.S. suspension of cooperation following the coup and, probably, because of a degree of French anti-American influence. Although there appears no national strategy as yet, the Mauritanians have also addressed internal extremism with Aziz speaking of the "embryonic" threat within Mauritanian society and key ministries starting activities to counter extremism -- especially among Mauritania's youth. The Mauritanians have gone out of their way to cooperate in the investigation of the June 23 AQIM killing of a private American in Nouakchott.

Negatives: The clear efforts to ensure security have has some negative consequences. Nightly roadblocks throughout the capital have invited petty corruption and have led to arbitrary harassment on grounds other than security. Afro-Mauritanians and Black Moor appear more likely to be

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harassed although they do not meet the standard AQIM profile and women seem to be subject to a conservative Islamic prejudice if out on their own at night. The emphasis of security forces on counter-terrorism is said to have left poorer neighborhoods with less anti-crime presence leading to increases in criminality according to our local staff. There is, as yet, no indication of a counter-narcotics strategy.

¶4. (C) Good Governance - B :

Positives: Aziz' populist election campaign strategy focused heavily on breaking with the cycle of corruption by political elites of the past. He has made anti-corruption the central priority of his first quarter with many early skeptics increasingly believing he is sincere. When a Global Fund audit of Mauritania's AIDS program found substantial misappropriation of funds, Aziz took the extremely unusual step of arresting the head of the program and several senior staff even though the head of the program was a close relative of the Prime Minister and Minister of Health. Aziz has been cracking down on abuse of official vehicles and he has also publicly fired two governors for illegal sale of public land, has fired several heads of public companies for malfeasance, and has demanded repayment of funds from scores of government officials. While it was feared Aziz would use his anti-corruption campaign only to target political enemies, few see a political bias in most of his actions to date. The government has published an Anti-Corruption Strategy that has been very well received by the international donor community.

Negatives: Governmental effectiveness is seen as poor to date since the new ministers seem either insufficiently experienced or insufficiently authorized to advance policy. President Aziz is reputed to be a micro-manager with all items of any significance needing his authority. Aziz is said to stifle open debate in cabinet meetings and does not accept dissension. While an overview of Council of Ministers meetings is published, the decision making process in the new government remains opaque.

¶5. (C) Political and Press Freedoms - C- :

**Positives:** Aziz gets credit for what he DIDN'T do. He has not launched a campaign, as detractors had warned, to shut down opposition press and parties. While seen with suspicion by the opposition, he did reach out to a former element of the FNDD opposition coalition -- the Tawassoul Islamic party -- which is, in fact, now running a joint Senate campaign with Aziz' majority UPR party. Aziz did not dissolve the National Assembly as he could have as a newly elected president leaving his election rival -- Messaoud Ould Boulkheir -- in his position as President of the National Assembly. It is understood the government is poised to implement the media liberalization law passed prior to the coup which would open the door for private radio and television programming.

**Negatives:** As noted in the recent MCC Scorecard for 2009, Mauritania has dropped significantly in scores on political and press freedoms. The scores reflect the situation during the coup, but Mauritania's international image still suffers.

Aziz did not seriously undertake after his election victory the ongoing political dialogue with the opposition called for in the Dakar Accords (although, admittedly, the opposition also did little to encourage such dialogue). Serious abuses during the coup including the conviction of an anti-regime website editor, Hanevy Ould Dehah, were not reversed. Indeed, a reporter from Hanevy's Taqadoumy website was also detained and questioned in relation to anti-government publications.

#### ¶6. (C) Human Rights - C :

**Positives:** Aziz has completed the process of Mauritanian refugee repatriation from Senegal started by President Abdallahi. With a final repatriation in October, the UNHCR is now poised to declare the refugee problem in Senegal closed -- one of the rare occasions when such a declaration can be made. In addition to completing the repatriation,

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Aziz has reinstated hundreds of Afro-Mauritanian government workers who were forcibly expelled in the late 80's and reinstated pension rights for others who have already reached retirement age. Aziz named Black Moors to the key portfolios of Justice and Interior -- a symbolic signal of interest in addressing lingering slavery issues in Mauritania. Likewise, his appointment of a woman as Foreign Minister set a precedent for North Africa.

**Negatives:** An election ploy to resolve the "passif humanitaire" human rights legacy of the 1989 - 1991 abuses has been criticized. Illiterate Afro-Mauritanians who had signed an agreement on the passif humanitaire now claim they were unaware they had given up rights for future legal recourse. The government has done little to address the slavery issue. The visiting UN Special Rapporteur for slavery found willingness on the part of the government to discuss the "sequels to slavery" but denial of ongoing slavery problems.

#### ¶7. (C) Economic Management - B- :

**Positives:** The economic challenges would have been difficult no matter who had won the elections in July. The government has very little in cash reserves and the value of their export products (iron ore, oil, and fish) is low. Severe flooding and power shortages coupled with rising food prices posed early emergencies for the new government. Aziz named a strong economic team in Finance and the Central Bank (both of whom had a good track record in the Abdallahi government) that was able to re-establish relations with the IMF, World Bank, and European Commission. The strong government response to fraud in the national AIDS program engendered donor confidence in other non-AIDS related assistance programs. The government was able to announce some new investments in the mining sector and build some economic confidence after TOTAL started exploratory drilling for an

on-shore oil concession in the east of the country. The government responded very well to the immediate life safety issues posed by heavy August - September floods although long-term rehabilitation is hampered by chronic lack of funds. The government scraped together funds to finance short-term power generation following severe mid-summer power outages.

Negatives: There has been little to no effort to account for public spending during the period of the coup -- when substantial expenditures were used to gin up popular support.

A comprehensive development strategy has yet to be released.

Hard currency remains in extremely short supply allowing monopoly benefits to the handful of importers who can find hard currency for imports. The cost of living is increasing as a result. A parallel hard currency market has started to develop although the spread remains less than 25%.

¶8. (C) Foreign Affairs - B :

Positives: The newly elected government was quick to open a new chapter in bilateral relations with the U.S. following the year-long adversarial posturing following the coup. From the President on down, the government indicates a strong desire to re-engage. Aziz has moved faster to bolster ties with France and Spain -- both of whom provided diplomatic cover during the coup. The naming of a female as Foreign Minister played well with the West allowing her to gain special attention at UNGA. When asked, President Aziz indicated willingness to work with the U.S. in addressing the crisis in Guinea (noting his displeasure that Dadis keeps referring to him as his role model). The government has been able to move forward with Japan and Turkey in establishing new embassies in Mauritania -- Brazil is expected to follow suit soon.

Negatives: Aziz has indicated no willingness to "unfreeze" relations with Israel although neither does he plan to fully cut ties. Mauritania remains more closely aligned with hard-line Muslims in Syria, Iran and Libya although it is, as yet, unclear whether Aziz will allow Iran to establish an embassy in Nouakchott. Aziz has met with Venezuelan President Chavez and attended Chavez' Latin America - Africa

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Summit.

¶9. (C) Public Opinion - B :

Positives: Aziz's credible efforts to address corruption have paid off with the impoverished majority of Mauritanians reversing an immediate post-election let down that all his campaign promises did not immediately materialize. Political pundits suggest his anti-corruption campaign is challenging elite interests and may lead to his downfall (for some opposition pundits, this is clearly wishful thinking).

Negatives: As with most Mauritanian governments, the Aziz government is poor in public communications. Dire economic straits continue to pose the risk of public unrest. Aziz will always have "coup leader" in his resume -- leaving the door open for some other disgruntled security force leader to make his own play.

¶10. (C) Comment: We rely heavily on our local staff and key contacts in evaluating the Aziz government recognizing that most of these individuals were staunchly against Aziz during the coup. There is obviously a tendency to discount anything Aziz does as being more "show than substance;" however, some of our previously strongly anti-coup contacts are grudgingly accepting that Aziz is doing some things (security and anti-corruption) quite well and hasn't done anything particularly bad in other areas. The new government is markedly less energetic in its first three months than the first Abdallahi government was following the 2007 elections -- this may be in the interest of being methodical in putting

together a strategy but strongly suggests that Aziz had little broad policy strategy in place once he finally gained legitimate power. The strategy will come over time as will closer collaboration with the U.S. as the government gets over its initial wariness. End Comment.

BOULWARE